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ABSTRACT

To determine the effects of interruptions on teachers' and pupils' morale and work, a descriptive correlational study was conducted using a survey of 65 teachers and 62 pupils in 8 urban elementary schools. The survey, conducted from November 1980 through June 1981, consisted of open-ended and closed-ended items and was administered to teachers individually and to pupils in small groups. Three types of interruptions were noted: out-of-class instruction (pullout programs), visitors, and the school intercom system. From six questions asked teachers and pupils, it was concluded that none of the distractions influenced morale. However, pupils noted that their ability to work was hampered by all three types of distractions, and both teachers and pupils found that repeated interruptions adversely affected morale and work. Moreover, both teachers and pupils estimated that about one-half hour of class time per day was devoted to trying to eliminate distractions. Interruptions by visitors were the most distracting to teachers and pupils; of the two remaining types of interruptions, pullout programs had more effect on teacher morale, and the intercom system more commonly distracted students. (JW)

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A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF THE PERCEIVED INFLUENCE
OF INSTITUTIONAL INTERRUPTIONS ON THE MORALE AND WORK
OF TEACHERS AND PUPILS IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

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A Descriptive Study of the Perceived Influence
of Institutional Interruptions on the Morale and Work
of Teachers and Pupils in Elementary Schools

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The Problem

While educational research of elementary schools is generally concerned with the improvement of instruction and learning, scant attention is paid to the problem of classroom distraction and interruption. Yet, these events can insidiously undermine educational processes. This is often demonstrated by their disruption of classroom function, their erosion of work time, and their frustration of individual effort to achieve academic goals.

Of particular interest, are those distractions generated by the institution itself. These may be creating a unique dilemma for teachers and pupils; that is, the very school organization that requires them to maintain time and work schedules paradoxically produces interruptions that could interfere with the accomplishment of these objectives.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine the influence of three types of institutional interruptions: 1) out-of-class pupil instruction or "pullout programs"; 2) visitors; and, 3) the intercommunication system, as perceived by teachers and as perceived by pupils on two selected variables, morale and work.

Methodology and Sample

The research involved a descriptive correlational study using survey techniques, and was conducted from November, 1980 through June, 1981. The subjects were 55 teachers in Grades Kindergarten through Sixth, and 62 pupils in Grades Fourth through Sixth. They were voluntarily recruited from eight public elementary schools in the Borough of Manhattan, New York City. The survey instrument, consisting of open-ended and closed-end items, was designed to answer the research questions. This was administered to teachers individually and to pupils on a small group basis.

The Research Questions, Results and Conclusions

For the purpose of clarity, the research questions, findings and conclusions are presented together.

First, it was important to determine, "What are the perceptions of teachers and those of pupils regarding the effect of the three interruption types on their morale?"

The results reveal that none of the forms researched: (a) pullout programs; (b) visitors; or (c) the intercommunication system had an influence on morale, except that these were viewed as being "unpredictable events".

It was concluded, therefore, that while a person's attitude is not necessarily affected by these forms of distractions, individuals could be exhibiting some stress reactions and performance degradation. Studies on the topic show that unpredictable and uncontrollable aversive environmental stimuli are likely to produce such behaviors.

Next, it was interesting to find out, "What are the subjects' perceptions regarding the impact of the three institutional interruptions on their ability to work?"

The data indicate that the responses were different for each interruption form. Although both teachers and pupils thought that the "visitor" type affected their work, the groups differed with respect to the other two forms. Teachers perceived that the "intercommunication system" interruptions had no influence on work, while the "pullout programs" type drew mixed reactions. On the other hand, pupils perceived that both of these interruptions had an impact on work, especially concerning the item, "pupils' social behavior which interfered with work".

This leads to the conclusion that teachers and pupils could be viewing their worlds quite differently. Further analysis comparing the two groups confirms this, as the results show pupils' morale and work were perceived to be more significantly affected by all three interruptions researched than were teachers'.

Another concern of the study was, "What is the perceived frequency of occurrence of each interruption type; and, do relationships exist between perceived frequency and perceived influence on morale and work?"

According to the findings, the subjects believed that the three interruption forms occurred between six and eleven times daily. Additionally, some relationships were found to exist between the perceived frequency of an interruption occurrence and perceived impact on morale and work.

Thus, it was determined that the frequency with which an interruption happens may be a factor affecting an individual's behavior and attitude. These results are important when considered in the context of related research which suggests that the interruption types studied may represent but a small percentage of all interruptions perceived by teachers and pupils to occur in classrooms.

As time was considered essential, a question was asked, "What are the subjects' perceptions with respect to the amount of time consumed in eliminating the distractive effects of the interruptions; and, do relationships exist between perceived distraction elimination time and perceived impact on morale and work?"

The results reveal that teachers and pupils thought that about one-half hour of daily classtime was spent eliminating the effects of all three interruption types researched. Also, some relationships were found to exist between perceived distraction elimination time and perceived influence on morale and work.

As was the case with frequency, the conclusion is drawn that distraction elimination time could be a factor affecting an individual's behavior and attitude, as well. These data are noteworthy if we consider that related literature suggests this amount may represent a small proportion of all time perceived by teachers and pupils to be consumed in eliminating the distractive effects for all interruptions occurring in classrooms.

Finally, an inquiry was made asking, "What are the subjects' perceptions with regard to the relative impact of the interruption types on morale and work?"

An analysis of the data shows that teachers and pupils perceived that interruptions by "visitors" had more significant influence on their morale and work than did the other two forms. Of the latter types, interruptions by "pullout programs" had more perceived effect on teacher morale, while those by the "intercommunication system" had more perceived effect on pupils' ability to work.

Therefore, it is possible that the perceived influence of an interruption on morale and work is somewhat dependent upon the nature of that interruption.

Educational Significance

This study, which describes environmental factors that can affect classroom management and allotment of instructional time, could have implications for the teaching act. Additionally information concerning perceived influence of school-generated distractions may reflect teacher and pupil attitudes toward the school as a workplace; and, this could have meaning for elementary school management, supervision and procedures. Furthermore, data related to those features of the classroom environment that might affect the learning climate or individual performance could prove useful to educational researchers of elementary classroom settings.